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## *The Stage and the Museum, a Contemporary Dynamic*

**Franz Anton Cramer**

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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# The Stage and the Museum, a Contemporary Dynamic

Franz Anton Cramer

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## REFERENCES

*Chorégrapheur l'exposition = Choreographing Exhibitions*, Marne-la-Vallée : La Ferme du Buisson ; Sankt Gallen : Kunst Halle, 2013. Sous la dir. de Mathieu Copeland et Julie Pellegrin

*Danse – An Anthology*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2014, (New York series). Sous la dir. de Noémie Solomon

*Jean-François Pirson : la Danse de l'arpenteur*, Bruxelles : La Lettre volée, 2014

*Anna Halprin: Dancing Life/Danser la vie*, Bruxelles : Contredanse, 2014

« *Rétrospective* » par *Xavier Le Roy*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2014, (Nouvelles scènes). Sous la dir. de Bojana Cvejić

*Raumverschiebung: Black Box — White Cube*, Hildesheim : Georg Olms, 2014, (Schriften). Sous la dir. de Barbara Büscher, Verena Elisabeth Eitel et Beatrix von Pilgrim

- 1 Exhibiting and (re)presenting -otherwise put, the exhibition and the spectacle- are the two sides of one and the same coin. Whereas, for the past ten years or so, choreography has started to move away from the stage of the present and invade those places of history called museums, theatres and art festivals are experimenting with the variable forms of exhibitions and retrospectives.<sup>1</sup> It is under the sign of an increasing immaterialization of the art object that exhibition curators and artists alike are trying to identify meeting points. Forms of aesthetic consumption are becoming confused between the system of the time-frame—in a gallery or museum—and the system of the stage as part of a live spectacle. This latter only has its own shelf life for simultaneously appearing and disappearing.

- 2 The collective book *Raumverschiebung: Black Box —White Cube* draws up a kind of inventory of the venues of these many different movements. In it, the venue is understood on the basis of a relational conception: “The venue is constructed solely through the arrangement of bodies, their actions and their movements”.<sup>2</sup> This space, which we might describe as “performative”, “rubs shoulders with a set of spaces which are constructed, imaginary, narrative and fictitious. This set is actualized both in the spectacle and in other artistic forms of visibility”.<sup>3</sup> The volume is divided into four sections: “Placements”, “Scenographies”, “Screens” and “Re/Configurations”. It proposes as many analyses of venues, be they theatres or museums, cinematographic or curatorial. In her article “Politiken des Zu-Sehen-Gebens” [Politics of Presentation], Iris Dressler provides a report of her activity as an exhibition curator with the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart. According to her, the main challenge posed by the contemporary exhibition consists in the creation of a transparency not only in the choice of the works shown but also, and above all, in the diffusion of the unavoidable restrictions of the museum system itself—be it in a White Cube or any other imaginable space. “There is no such thing as an ideal art institution or ideal exhibition venue”, she explains. “The two are somewhat tied to a future development, a reformulation, a permanent negotiation between conditions, needs and possibilities, between institution, artist, work and public. It is an ongoing process of work and apprenticeship, reliant on decisions and deformations, consensuses and disagreements, habitual praxis and exceptional states.”<sup>4</sup>
- 3 This is precisely what tallies with the present-day situation of the museum, between place of sacredness and place of de-stabilization. The public’s position is called into question as much as the artwork’s status. This latter does not wish to be, and can no longer be, appreciated in the simple contemplative posture, and calls for an active involvement. This was also the point of departure for Stephanie Rosenthal on the occasion of the installation of the travelling exhibition *Move: Choreographing You—Art and Dance since the 1960s*, which caused a sensation in 2010–2011 at the Hayward Gallery in London, and at the Haus der Kunst München and the K21 in Düsseldorf. “For me”, Stephanie Rosenthal explains, “the purpose of presenting performative work in the exhibition was to see how enriching it can be for art exhibition professionals to work with choreographers and rediscover space. The point was not to transfer performances that existed onstage to the exhibition space, but rather to develop new pieces for the exhibition space”.<sup>5</sup>
- 4 Between practices of spatialization in the museum and spatialization (and setting in motion) by artist-choreographers, exchanges are lively and display a reciprocal curiosity. The difference between stage and space, theatre and museum in fact turns out to be less important than one might think. Museums are defined as much by the permanence of their collections as by the ephemerality of their temporary exhibitions. They re-ignite works by altering their presentation context, the better to display the said praxis and the better to address contemporaries.<sup>6</sup>
- 5 Choreographers, dancers and performers are well aware of the fact that henceforward their works will and must lay claim to much longer periods of time than is proposed by just the spectacle. The list of museums and art venues calling upon retrospectives, recreations of works, and performance events coming from the past would be a lengthy one.
- 6 Mathieu Copeland has compiled reports from curators as well as artists around the pivotal project *Une Exposition Choréographiée* (La Ferme du Buisson Contemporary Art Centre and Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen, 2009–2010). As part of the event, he invited three

dancers to execute, during public opening hours, different movements based on scores written by artists and previously brought together. The works exhibited thus came from identifiable artists; their manner of presentation, on the other hand, remained strictly associated with the body and with the whim of the dancers-performers-players. Here we are confronted by a perspicacious form mixing object and process, and the material and the ephemeral, without necessarily imagining any hierarchy between the two.

- 7 And yet the idea remains a persistent one in the various discourses that the performance can be neither repeatable nor capable of projecting itself towards the future. Barbara Formis disputes this ideology of the eternal singularity of any performance in her contribution to the book "Performance Here and Then" (pp.56-69): "The paradox of presence", she writes, "lies in producing a lasting experience, a practically unlimited experience."<sup>7</sup> The fact is that the confirmation of Performance Art and of most of its theories having to do with the non-reproducibility of this experience, invites us, according to Barbara Formis, to raise questions: "[...] we only believe in the effectiveness of disappearance and nothingness because we seek to save presence".<sup>8</sup> This presence, however, is invariably inexorably connected to its past. The present is never based on a clean slate. As a result, "a performance is what has already survived, the remains of the body's work."<sup>9</sup>
- 8 The latest example of a choreographic work based on the notion of experience repeated and transposed into exhibition venues is probably "*Retrospective*" by Xavier Le Roy. It started out in 2012 at the Antoni Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona. The project consists in literally exhibiting, by way of dancers, movements and scenes taken from Xavier Le Roy's solo performances, and treating them like objects. The fact is that it was every bit as intrinsically decisive for this proposal (the sixth one will take place in New York in November 2014, after Rennes, Salvador de Bahia, Hamburg, Rio de Janeiro and Paris) that the dancer-performers should invite the audience to listen to their personal narratives around the work represented, and listen, too, to their biographical relation with the works of Xavier Le Roy and the influence of these latter on their own artistic work. The intimacy of the exchange and the length of the (re)presentation remain crucial factors in this retrospective, as is attested to by the Foundation's director, Laurence Rassel, in a conversation with Christophe Wavelet: "[...] if the Foundation sometimes makes it possible to be conceived as a stage, this is not enough to turn it into a theatre. The movement [...] of the audience in it is important, and time is too: the time that the experience lasts."<sup>10</sup> For it is based on experience that the work is formed. "A way that is at once very simple and very concrete to make this tangible: the works do not exist if there is nobody to look at them."<sup>11</sup> So it is a matter of finding one or more public spaces, including museums, in order to re-materialize art, in a way: "Putting a contemporary art institution to the test of bodies [...] seems to me less "actual" or "non-actual" than judicious and potentially fruitful. People nowadays in Art circles readily talk about a "comeback of performance", but [...] what is coming back? What have we learnt? What are we transmitting?"<sup>12</sup>
- 9 Experience! One would like to answer. Yet the transfer of the aesthetic experience of the museum towards stage structures and representation may be a two-edged victory. Tino Sehgal, for example, is well-known for his praxis which consists in not leaving any traces and confining the work in a moment laden with aura and presence. Because there is neither image nor document, what is presented devours all our possible attention. So one duly talks rather about what is not present and not about what one may see.

- 10 The object-based idea of what is stable seems to be no longer topical in contemporary culture. Works and their eternal values have made way for arrangements of the moment. The heritage is becoming an archive which gives rise to new readings restricted to the present moment. The museum, for its part, copes with this fact by occupying the present of the performance like a pure act endowed with the aura of the perennial as it is perceived in permanent collections. But the perennial does not dodge metamorphosis either; it is as living, and vulnerable, as the very history of choreography.
- 11 The stampede towards the unstable, where dance has become the symbolic form if ever there was, is certainly not a recent phenomenon. The intellectual challenges which have allowed this permeability are the subject of an anthology compiled and published by Noémie Solomon. Here, articles and reports written and published since 2002 help to document the genesis of a line of thinking that goes beyond the boundaries and borders between disciplines and forms. Yvane Chapuis, in her contribution titled “Towards a Critical Reading of Contemporary Dance” (pp. 133-144, and published for the first time in 2002) makes the point that “[...] everything contributes to making the ‘theatricality’ of the exhibition transparent. It is now enacted like an event (a performance?) in real time and space – precisely the two coordinates that the white cube did away with [...]”.<sup>13</sup>
- 12 If the specific features of the museum—its “neutrality” and its “timelessness”—are in their turn historicized and temporalized, we are entitled to wonder whether the presumed ontological difference between the art object and the choreographic opus still has any meaning. Would it not be necessary to talk rather of an art “[...] relieved of any idea of transcendence, where the work is not an autonomous entity, but the component part of a situation [...]”?<sup>14</sup> The art of movement, or art in motion, in the museum or on stage, instructs us about the fact that, in the end of the day, nothing matters any more except experience, which becomes common currency.

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## NOTES

1. See for example: the Berlin festival *Foreign Affairs* in its 2014 edition and the conference *How to Dance With Art - On the Interference of Time-based Arts and Art Spaces* ([http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/aktuell/festivals/foreign\\_affairs/fa14\\_programm\\_diskurs/fa14\\_veranstaltungsdetail\\_diskurs\\_98774.php](http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/aktuell/festivals/foreign_affairs/fa14_programm_diskurs/fa14_veranstaltungsdetail_diskurs_98774.php)); the Lenbachhaus in Munich and its themed programme around the Judson Dance Theater, *Dance at Judson And On And On And On*, July/August 2014 (<http://www.lenbachhaus.de/veranstaltungen/dance-at-judson-and-on-and-on-and-on/>); and the Salzburg festival and its monographic exhibition *Mit dem Körper denken. Eine Retrospektive in Bewegung* dedicated to the work of Simone Forti (18 July-9 November 2014).
2. Büscher, Barbara, Eitel, Verena, Pilgrim, Beatrix von, “Introduction”, *Raumverschiebung: Black Box – White Cube*, Hildesheim : Olms, 2014, p. 6.
3. Büscher, Barbara, Eitel, Verena, Pilgrim, Beatrix von, “Introduction”, *Op. cit.*, p. 6
4. Dressler, Iris. “Politiken des Zu-Sehen-Gebens”, *Ibid.*, p. 77
5. Rosenthal, Stephanie. “Choreographing You”, *Ibid.*, p. 192
6. See on this subject: Bishop, Claire. “Radical Museology or What’s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?”, Cologne : Walther König, 2014

7. Formis, Barbara. "Performance Here and Then", *Choreographing Exhibitions*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2013, p. 59
8. Formis, Barbara, "Performance Here and Then", *Op. cit.*, p. 63
9. *Ibid.*, p. 67
10. "Interroger l'institution. Conversation entre Christophe Wavelet et Laurence Rassel", "Rétrospective" par Xavier Le Roy, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2014, p. 40
11. "Interroger l'institution. Conversation entre Christophe Wavelet et Laurence Rassel", *Op. cit.*, p. 41
12. *Ibid.*, p. 45
13. Chapuis, Yvane. "Toward a Critical Reading of Contemporary Dance", *Danse: An Anthology*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2014, (New York Series), p. 135
14. Chapuis, Yvane. "Toward a Critical Reading of Contemporary Dance", *Op. cit.*, p. 134